

The Meaning of Death and the Phenomenon of Violence: A Theological Dialogue Approach between Marapu and Catholicism in Sumba

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Abstracts:

The phenomenon of social violence in Sumba reflects broader dynamics within the Asian context, where death, communal conflict, and the pursuit of reconciliation are often linked to local belief systems. The Marapu tradition emphasizes the value of cosmic harmony, yet contemporary realities reveal an increase in conflicts related to land, inheritance, and family relations. This study addresses a gap in previous research, which has tended to frame Marapu rituals within an anthropological-sociological framework, thereby neglecting their theological dimensions and potential for reconciliation. Using Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, this study offers a methodological innovation through the fusion of theological analysis, ethnography, and a Catholic theological reading to interpret the meaning of death and violence within the horizon of local cosmology. The Marapu tradition is understood as a religious system that affirms the continuity of life, ancestral relationships, and cosmic balance, while the Catholic faith interprets death as participation in the Paschal mystery and the path toward divine communion. The analysis shows that violence in Sumba can be interpreted as a distortion of the values of relationship and honor upheld through death rites. The convergence of the horizons of these two traditions opens the possibility for a contextual theology of reconciliation, emphasizing relationality and community unity. Pastorally, this study offers a paradigm of peace rooted in local culture while corresponding with the Christian mystery of salvation.

Keywords:

Marapu Ritual, Philosophical Hermeneutics, Contextual Theology, Social Reconciliation, Eschatological Hope.

Introduction

Sumba Island is known for its rich culture and deep traditional religiosity, but is currently faced with a paradoxical social phenomenon. On the one hand, the Sumbanese people uphold the values of balance, solidarity, and reconciliation rooted in the spiritual heritage of Marapu; on the other, social violence continues to occur and is even increasing. According to data from the Southwest Sumba and West Sumba Regional Police in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia (2020-2024), more than 116 cases of violence and murder related to land disputes, inheritance disputes,^{1,2,3,4,5} and family conflicts were recorded. This violence is often framed within traditional narratives, but it actually demonstrates the tension between Marapu's religious values and modern socio-economic pressures. This phenomenon raises a fundamental theological question: why can a society with a religious system that emphasizes cosmic harmony be trapped in a cycle of violence and human rights violations? This reality demonstrates that violence in Sumba is not only a social problem but also a hermeneutic one: how the meanings of death, honor, and retribution are understood within the local religious horizon. The Catholic Church, present in Sumba, also faces this pastoral challenge:

¹ Dewi Rara, *Statistik Kriminal Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur 2020* (Kupang: ©Badan Pusat Statistik Propinsi NTT, 2020).

² Dewi Rara, *Statistik Kriminal Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur 2021* (Kupang: ©BPS Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur, 2021).

³ Dewi Rara, *Statistik Kriminal Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur 2022*, vol. 26 (Kupang: ©BPS Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur, 2023).

⁴ Dewi Rara, *Statistik Kriminal Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur 2023* (Kupang: ©BPS Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur, 2024).

⁵ Dewi Rara, *Statistik Kriminal Propinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur 2024* (Kupang: ©BPS Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur, 2025).

how to proclaim the Gospel of peace without negating the traditional religious meanings deeply rooted in Marapu cosmology.⁶

In the discourse of the study of religions in Asia, Marapu occupies an important position as a living and complex system of religious meaning. It is not merely a form of animism or magical belief, but a cosmological and theological structure that affirms the harmonious relationship between humans, nature, ancestors, and the Creator.⁷ In Marapu cosmology, human life is always in balance between the visible world (*praing*) and the world of the ancestors (*praingu marapu*).⁸ Death is not understood as the end, but rather as a transition to a new communion with the ancestors who sustain the community. Death rituals such as *katoba* or *Katupura* serve as collective prayers that connect the two worlds, affirming intergenerational continuity and cosmic harmony.⁹ This tradition presents a theology of transcendence that is inseparable from concrete human experience. Thus, Marapu can be read as *an indigenous theology* that holds typical Asian cosmological wisdom, namely the connection between life, death, and the unity of all creation.

As emphasized by Aloysius Pieris, Asian theology must be rooted in two fundamental realities, namely mass poverty and religious plurality, which constitute a “*double baptism*” for Asian theology: baptism into poverty and into multi-religiosity.¹⁰ In this spirit, religious traditions like Marapu are not objects of mission, but rather theological subjects participating in God's revelation through history and symbols. In this context, the dialogue between Marapu and Catholic faith is not only a meeting of religious traditions, but also a meeting of two horizons of meaning regarding life, death, and salvation, as emphasized by Asian

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, 1959):74.

⁷ Oe. H Kapita, *Masyarakat Sumba Dan Adat Istiadatnya* (Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 1987).

⁸ Janet Hoskins, “Entering the Bitter House: Spirit Worship and Conversion in West Sumba,” *Indonesia* 41 (1986): 53–89.

⁹ Oe. H Kapita, *Masyarakat Sumba Dan Adat Istiadatnya* (Waingapu: Sumba Press, 1976): 44.

¹⁰ Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988): 67–70.

theologians as a path to an authentic *fusion of horizons*.¹¹ Many academic studies have been conducted on Marapu and death rituals in Sumba, but most have focused on the social and anthropological dimensions. Research by Wohangara (2013),¹² Maeja et al. (2024), and Carina & Adi (2025) highlights the social function of death rituals as a mechanism for maintaining community cohesion and cultural identity.¹³ Gunawan (2013) shows that there is a similarity in meaning between the symbol of sacrifice in the Marapu tradition and the Catholic Eucharistic liturgy,¹⁴ while Panda (2023) highlights the similarity in eschatological horizons between the two traditions.¹⁵ However, these studies have not yet explicitly utilized a theological-hermeneutic approach, especially from the perspective of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Most research has focused on social descriptions, failing to explore theological reflections that interpret death symbols and rituals as religious texts that can serve as a *locus* for interfaith dialogue. Thus, there is a significant *research gap*: no research has examined the meaning of death and violence as a space for hermeneutic encounter between Catholic theology and Marapu cosmology.

This gap is what drives the need for a new approach that places the two religious traditions in a dialogical position. Gadamer's hermeneutic approach is relevant because it emphasizes that true understanding arises from a creative encounter between two horizons of meaning (*fusion of horizons*), not from the dominance of one tradition over the other. Through this framework, the Marapu tradition can be read not as an object of study, but as a theological subject that contributes to the

¹¹ Paul A Bharathi, "Asia As Locus of Theology Religious Pluralism," *Studia Philosophica et Theologica* 24, no. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.35312/spet.v24i1.551>.

¹² B Retang Wohangara, "Acces Ritual In Eastern Sumba, Indonesia," *Celt*, 2013: 87-101.

¹³ Jhon Daeng Maeja et al., "Kristus Dalam Berbagai Budaya," *SAPA*, 2024: 126-39, <https://doi.org/10.12568/sapa/v9i1.646>.

¹⁴ A Gunawan, "Animal Sacrifice in Marapu Rituals of Sumba," *Anthropos* 113 (2018): 255-70.

¹⁵ Herman Punda Panda and Arnoldus Yansen Teguh Bebo, "The Animal Sacrifice Ritual as an Entry Point to Theology in the Cultural Context of Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara," *International Journal of Cultural and Religious Studies*, 2023, 37–43, <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijcrs>.

formation of the horizon of Catholic faith in Asia. This study aims to: (1) explore the concept of death in Marapu theology and compare it with the Catholic view of death and salvation; (2) develop a theological dialogue model based on Gadamer's hermeneutics to understand the encounter of meaning between local cosmology and Catholic eschatology; (3) interpret the phenomenon of social violence in Sumba as a religious expression of a distorted interpretation of death and honor; and (4) formulate pastoral implications for the local Church in building a praxis of peace rooted in Catholic cultural values and spirituality. Theoretically, this study offers a contribution to the development of Asian contextual theology by making the dialogue between the Catholic faith and local religious systems an equal field of theological reflection.

This research contributes to the development of Asian contextual theology by offering an interreligious hermeneutic model based on Gadamer's thought that reconciles indigenous religious cosmology with Catholic eschatological perspectives. From a pastoral praxis perspective, this study is expected to enrich the Catholic Church in Sumba's approach to building a spirituality of peace rooted in local cultural values, while reaffirming the Christian belief that death is a path to new life and reconciliation.

Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the meanings of death, rituals, prayer, relationships with ancestors, communal life, experiences of the Catholic faith, and the phenomenon of violence within the socio-religious context of Sumba society. This approach was chosen because the research is oriented toward understanding the experiences and constructions of meaning that exist within the community, rather than measuring the frequency of behavior or forming statistical generalizations. The research focuses on the

intersection between the Marapu death traditions and the Catholic faith, particularly in understanding death as a religious experience related to relationships between humans, ancestors, the community, nature, and the divine.¹⁶ The research was conducted at the St. Peter and Paul Station in Lediwatu, St. Clement Katiku Loku Parish, Diocese of Weetebula, Central Sumba Regency, East Nusa Tenggara. This location was purposively selected because it demonstrates concrete interactions between the practice of the Catholic faith and the Marapu religious heritage. This context allows the study to examine how local traditions are preserved, reinterpreted, and negotiated in the lives of Catholics.¹⁷

Informants were selected through purposive sampling, taking into account their direct involvement, experience, and knowledge of Marapu death rituals and the pastoral life of the Church. This study utilized six informants representing several relevant perspectives: two Marapu leaders (R1-R2), two Parish Advisors and Religious Educators (PUGA) (P1-P2), and two priests (I1-I2). This composition allowed the study to bring together the internal perspectives of the Marapu tradition with the experiences of the faithful and the Catholic pastoral perspective. The Marapu leaders provided information on the meaning of death, ritual structure, the *habayang* prayer, traditional symbols, relationships with ancestors, and communal obligations, while the PUGA, catechists, and priests offered perspectives on the lived experience of faith, the continuity of traditional practices among Catholics, and pastoral challenges. Thus, Marapu is positioned not merely as the subject of anthropological

¹⁶ Irene Umbu Lolo, "Not Forbidden but a Fellowship 'Food': A Theological Discourse on the Dynamic Encounter between Christian and Marapu Religion in Sumba, Indonesia," *Asia Journal Of Theology* 36, no. 2 (2022): 174–93.

¹⁷ Krisharyanto Umbu Deta, "Marapu Indigenous Resistance against the Corporation to Protect Land: Perceiving Land through Inter-Subjective Cosmology," *Studi Agama* 4, no. 2 (2021): 50–65, <https://doi.org/10.33363/swjsa.v4i2.765>.

description, but as a religious horizon possessing dialogical capacity within theological reflection.¹⁸

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and documentation on July 25, 2025. The interviews focused on three main areas: understanding of death within the Marapu worldview; the meaning and function of death rituals; and the relationship between Marapu practices and the lived experience of the Catholic faith. Questions covered the meaning of *Laba*, traditional cloth, the care of the deceased, burial, *Tebung*, the *habayang* prayer, as well as the relationships between humans, *hamangu/ndewa*, ancestors, *Prai Marapu*, and the community. Participant observation was used to gain an understanding of ritual actions, symbols, the sequence of the procession, family involvement, and the social context surrounding these practices. Documentation supplemented the data on prayers, symbols, ritual stages, and relevant written sources. The integration of these three techniques allowed the research to bring together verbal narratives with ritual practices and the social context in which these meanings are produced and passed down.¹⁹

In addition to primary data, the study utilized secondary data on crime statistics to provide a broader empirical context regarding the phenomenon of violence in Sumba. A compilation of 116 cases of violence related to land disputes, inheritance disputes, and family conflicts was used as contextual data.²⁰ This data was not treated as ethnographic data and was not used to establish a causal relationship between Marapu and violence. Its function differs from that of field data: interviews and observations were used to understand experiences and the construction of meaning at the community level, while statistics provided an overview of

¹⁸ Herman Punda Panda, "Perjalanan Jiwa Ke 'Kampung Leluhur' Konsep Kematian Menurut Kepercayaan Asli Masyarakat Sumba (Marapu) Dan Perjumpaannya Dengan Ajaran Katolik," *Lumen Veritatis*, 2020, 197-220.

¹⁹ Theresia Noiman Derung et al., "Makna Upacara Kematian Dalam Keagamaan Marapu," *Pendidikan Agama Dan Teologi* 2, no. 4 (2022): 125-31, <https://doi.org/10.56393/intheos.v2i3.1268>.

²⁰ Rara, *Statistik Kriminal Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur* 2023.

the broader social context. Because the study focused on a single local context and relied on a limited number of informants, the findings are not intended to represent the entire population of Sumba or the entire Marapu community. These limitations serve as the basis for framing the study's results as contextual knowledge.

Data analysis was conducted thematically through repeated readings of interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentation. The data were then identified based on units of meaning and grouped into categories related to death, the soul, ancestors, rituals, communal relations, customary obligations, the Catholic faith, violence, and reconciliation. Next, patterns of similarities and differences among informants were analyzed to identify key themes. The credibility of the findings was strengthened through triangulation of sources and methods, by bringing together the perspectives of Marapu leaders, PUGA members, catechists, and priests with the results of observations and documentation. Differences in perspective were not eliminated but were retained as part of the complexity of the community's social and religious experiences.²¹

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is used after the data collection and analysis process as an interpretive framework, not as a data collection technique. The concept of "pre-understanding" is used to reflect on the researcher's initial horizon, which is shaped by language, experience, education, tradition, and faith. The concept of the "history of effects" helps us understand how history, collective memory, customs, language, and religious experience influence the formation of ritual meaning. Furthermore, the concept of the "fusion of horizons" is used to interpret the encounter between the Marapu horizon and the Catholic horizon. This encounter is not intended as assimilation or the

²¹ Lolo, "Not Forbidden but a Fellowship ' Food ': A Theological Discourse on the Dynamic Encounter between Christian and Marapu Religion in Sumba , Indonesia."

erasure of differences, but rather as a dialogical process that allows both horizons to illuminate one another and expand understanding regarding death, violence, and reconciliation.²²

Within this framework, the interview is understood as a dialogical space that allows the informant's horizon of experience to emerge and interact with the researcher's horizon. The interpretive process moves reflexively from empirical data toward theological reflection, while maintaining a distinction between the informants' voices, the results of literature reviews, statistical data, and the author's theological interpretations. Thus, Gadamer does not replace qualitative research methods but provides a hermeneutical framework to explain how new understandings can emerge through critical dialogue between two religious horizons.²³ The end result is not a homogenization of Marapu and Catholic traditions, but rather the creation of a dialogical theological space that allows the relational, communal, and reconciliatory values of local traditions to be critically examined in the light of the Catholic faith.²⁴ This approach serves as the foundation for further discussion regarding death as a space of theological encounter and the possibility of developing a theology of reconciliation in the Sumba context.

Discussion

The Marapu Perspective on Death: Continuity of Life and Cosmic Balance

The research findings indicate that, from the Marapu perspective, death is not primarily understood as the end of human existence, but rather as a transition toward eternal life. The accounts of Umbu Magawi Sakak (R1) and Umbu Setu Katadak (R2) both prominent Marapu figures

²² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

²³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

²⁴ Bharathi, "Asia As Locus of Theology Religious Pluralism."

reveal that the deceased are not understood as individuals who vanish from the order of life, but rather as individuals who transition from the human world to a realm associated with ancestors and spiritual reality, namely *Prai Marapu* or *Paraingu Marapu* (“the Marapu village” or “the ancestral village”). Human existence within the Marapu worldview is not limited to the biological dimension.²⁵ The concepts of *hamangu* and *ndewa* are essential for explaining the continuity of human existence after death as well as one’s relationship with the ancestral realm.²⁶

In the Marapu worldview, *hamangu* and *ndewa* are closely related but refer to different states of human existence. *Hamangu* pertains to the life force and the spiritual dimension of human beings while they are still in this world, whereas *ndewa* refers to spiritual existence after a person has died. This distinction indicates that death is not understood as a severing of the connection between the deceased and the living. What changes is the form of existence and the nature of their relationship. After leaving the body, *ndewa* continues its journey to the world of the ancestors, while the connection with family and community is still understood as part of a spiritual continuity. This belief forms the basis for the performance of death rites as a means of guiding the deceased toward their next state of existence.²⁷

Understanding of the *ndewa*’s journey is then manifested through a series of ritual acts that take place in stages. Death rites are not merely about the care of the deceased’s body, but constitute a symbolic process that accompanies a person’s transition from the world of the living to the world of the ancestors. In this process, the family and community play a

²⁵ Umbu Magawi Sakak dan Umbu Setu Katadak, tokoh Marapu Kampung Adat Prai Au-Majaga, Sumba Tengah, “Interview”, 25 Juli 2025, di Prai Au, Sumba Tengah, NTT

²⁶ According to Kapita, *hamangu* is the essence of the soul or life force that forms the core of human strength throughout life and enables humans to think, feel, and act. When a person dies, *hamangu* leaves the body and enters a spiritual realm known as *ndewa*. Therefore, *ndewa* is not simply synonymous with *hamangu*, but refers to the spiritual existence of *hamangu* after death Kapita, *Masyarakat Sumba Dan Adat Istiadatnya*, 1987.

²⁷ Kapita.

vital role, as the deceased's journey is understood to require support through prayer, traditional practices, and offerings. Here, rituals serve as a concrete expression of the belief that the relationship between the deceased, their family, and the ancestral realm must be established and maintained in accordance with Marapu customs.²⁸

Umbu Magawi Sakak (R1) and Umbu Setu Katadak (R2) in Prai Au, Central Sumba, demonstrate how this understanding is manifested in ritual practice. According to both of them, *habayang* (prayer) is an important part of death rites and is led by a *rato* (Marapu priest). The ceremony involves three *rato*: two are responsible for leading the prayers, while the third serves as a representative or messenger for the family. The *rato* wear traditional attire consisting of a black *regi* (sarong) and a *rowa* (headwrap). The *habayang* before the funeral is held at night with the immediate family, while on the day of the funeral, the prayer is conducted during the day and involves the extended family and relatives. Offerings in the ritual may consist of a water buffalo or a pig, with the type and size determined by the family's means.²⁹

The ritual process of death in the Marapu tradition unfolds through sequential and interrelated stages, which collectively govern the deceased's transition from earthly life to the world of the ancestors. This sequence begins with the sound of the *laba*, or *gong*, which serves as both a signal of death and a means of conveying the news of the death to the family and community. After the death is announced, a "*paborung*" is performed for the body of a man and a "*pajaukung*" for the body of a woman. These two stages are part of the traditional treatment of the deceased using ceremonial cloth. "*Paborung*" involves the use of ceremonial cloth for the body of a man, while "*pajaukung*" involves the use of ceremonial cloth for the body of a woman. These stages

²⁸ Derung et al., "Makna Upacara Kematian Dalam Keagamaan Marapu."

²⁹ Umbu Magawi Sakak dan Umbu Setu Katadak, tokoh Marapu Kampung Adat Prai Au-Majaga, Sumba Tengah," Interview"

demonstrate that from the very beginning of the ritual process, the deceased is treated according to customary regulations that differentiate treatment based on gender. After *paborung* or *pajaukung*, the body then enters the *palebarunga* stage, which involves arranging and positioning the body according to traditional customs. The next stage is *pekamati*, which involves notifying family members and relatives so they are aware of the death and can attend and participate in the ritual obligations. Their presence affirms that death is an event that involves the family network and the community. After that, the body enters the *totu ma mati* stage, which is a period of waiting and keeping vigil over the body for three days and three nights. This period provides an opportunity for family and relatives to gather and stay with the body before the burial. Once this period is over, the *patanung*, or burial, takes place, accompanied by animal offerings. This stage is a crucial part of the process of guiding the deceased to the world of the ancestors within the Marapu belief system.³⁰

This sequence demonstrates that the process of death in Marapu occurs in stages and follows a specific order. *Laba* marks the occurrence of death and simultaneously communicates this event to the community. *Paborung* or *pajaukung* pertains to the traditional treatment of the deceased, while *pekamati* connects the event of death to the kinship network. Furthermore, *totu ma mati* provides an opportunity for the family and community to remain with the deceased before the burial. The *patanung* stage is a crucial part of the process of guiding the deceased to the world of the ancestors. Thus, all of these stages form a series of rituals that accompany a person's transition from a member of the community of the living to the status of *ndewa*.³¹

³⁰ Umbu Magawi Sakak dan Umbu Setu Katadak, tokoh Marapu Kampung Adat Prai Au-Majaga, Sumba Tengah," Interview"

³¹ Panda, "Perjalanan Jiwa Ke 'Kampung Leluhur' Konsep Kematian Menurut Kepercayaan Asli Masyarakat Sumba (Marapu) Dan Perjumpaannya Dengan Ajaran Katolik."

In this ritual sequence, *tebung* the slaughter of an animal is one of the key elements. The buffalo or pig offered is understood as part of the provisions for the deceased on their journey to the Marapu world. This offering also serves as a form of respect for the deceased and the ancestors. After the slaughter, the meat is distributed to family members and mourners to be shared and consumed together. Thus, *tebung* is not only related to the aspect of offering but also involves the participation of family and the community throughout the process of death. This practice brings together the spiritual journey of the deceased with the social participation of the living.³² In the context of *tebung*, water buffalo have a broader significance than simply being sacrificial animals. They are viewed as provisions or a kind of “capital” for the deceased in their existence in the Marapu world. The number and size of the buffaloes offered depend on the family’s means, but they also serve as an expression of respect for the deceased. Therefore, the offering of buffaloes signifies that the family not only takes care of the deceased’s body through the funeral rites but also accompanies the *ndewa*’s journey with symbols that, according to Marapu beliefs, are necessary for life after death.³³

Throughout this entire process, death unfolds as an event that involves the community. The death of a family member mobilizes a broader social network through the presence of relatives, the fulfillment of customary obligations, and various forms of participation in supporting the bereaved family. Therefore, death rites are not only related to the journey of the deceased but also serve as a space for families and communities to fulfill their customary responsibilities. This involvement is closely tied to the role of the *kabihu* (tribe/clan) and kinship networks in

³² Panda and Bebo, “The Animal Sacrifice Ritual as an Entry Point to Theology in the Cultural Context of Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara.”

³³ Panda and Bebo.

Marapu life.³⁴ A person's identity is not only tied to their individual existence but also to their origins, family, and the social networks to which they belong. When someone dies, the event simultaneously brings about changes in family and community relationships, making the rituals an integral part of the process of restructuring those relationships.³⁵

This is why Marapu practices are still found in the lives of some Catholics with a Marapu background. Vinsensius Reku Tibu (P1) and Stefanus Radjang (P2) explained that most of the parishioners at the St. Peter and Paul Parish in Lediwatu come from a Marapu background. In some families, the children have been baptized into the Catholic faith, while the parents still maintain their Marapu beliefs and practices. According to their accounts, the continuation of these practices is linked, among other things, to a desire to preserve family traditions and one's position within traditional society. This phenomenon demonstrates that death rituals hold a significant place in the continuity of family and community identity. Marapu practices are not merely preserved for the sake of the rituals themselves, but because they embody connections to family, kabihu (tribe/clan), ancestors, and traditional social structures.³⁶ When a family member dies, these various obligations resurface in a concrete way. Therefore, the encounter with the Catholic faith does not automatically erase the entire structure of meaning that has shaped the community's social life. In this context, death rituals serve as a space that reveals the complexity of the relationships between religious identity, traditional identity, and kinship solidarity.³⁷

From these findings as a whole, it can be concluded that the Marapu perspective on death is built upon at least three main dimensions:

³⁴ Stefanus Si, "Marapu Death Prayer as a Locus Theologicus: A Hermeneutical Reading in the Perspective of Inculturated Theology" 26, no. 01 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.35312/spet.v26i1.836>.

³⁵ Kapita, *Masyarakat Sumba Dan Adat Istiadatnya*, 1987.

³⁶ Vinsensius Reku Tibu & Stefanus Radjang. (2025), "Interview", 25 Juli 2025, di Prai Au, Sumba Tengah, NTT

³⁷ Stefanus Si, Herman Punda Panda, and Raymundus I Made Sudhiarsa, "Umat Katolik Sumba Di Tengah Himpitan Tradisi Dan Kepercayaan Marapu: Menyimak Dan Menemukan Upaya Pastoral Untuk Menumbuhkan Pengetahuan Iman Umat Katolik Sumba," *Media Jurnal Filsafat Dan Teologi* 5, no. 1 (2024): 97–112.

relational, communal, and cosmic. The relational dimension is evident in the belief that death transforms the form of existence but does not sever human connections with family and ancestors. The communal dimension is evident in the involvement of family, relatives, and the community in the entire death rite. Meanwhile, the cosmic dimension is evident in the understanding of *Prai Marapu*, *Paraingu Marapu*, *hamangu*, or *ndewa*, which situates death within an order of existence that transcends the human world. These three dimensions do not stand alone but are interconnected.³⁸ The relationship with ancestors is maintained through communal practices; communal practices are grounded in an understanding of the cosmic order; and this cosmic understanding is translated into concrete actions through prayer and ritual. Thus, death in Marapu is an experience that unites human existence, social structure, and spiritual reality into a single unity of meaning.³⁹

This understanding also has moral implications. If human beings are understood as part of a network of relationships that includes family, ancestors, community, and the cosmic order, then human life cannot be viewed solely as an individual matter. A good life requires the cultivation of harmonious relationships with others and with the broader order of life. Conversely, actions that damage these relationships can be understood as disruptions to the community's balance. From this perspective, death rituals do not merely concern the deceased but also indirectly affirm the values that should govern the lives of the living: respect, solidarity, responsibility, balance, and the continuity of relationships.⁴⁰

³⁸ Umbu Magawi Sakak dan Umbu Setu Katadak, tokoh Marapu Kampung Adat Prai Au-Majaga, Sumba Tengah," Interview"

³⁹ Maria Mersi A. Wungubelen, Bertha Sri Eko Murtiningsih, and Daniel Susilo, "Communication Ethnography in the Royal Funeral Ritual in The," *Mediator* 17, no. June (2024): 95–111.

⁴⁰ Felix Wilfred, "Asian Theological Ferment (For Doing Theology in Contemporary Indonesia : Interdisciplinary Perspectives)," *IJIPTH* 1, no. 2 (2020): 73–90, <https://doi.org/10.47043/ijipth.v1i2.11>.

The Catholic Horizon: Death as Participation in the Paschal Mystery

Within the Catholic faith, death is understood in the light of the Paschal Mystery of Christ that is, His death and resurrection. Through the Paschal Mystery, Christ overcame the power of sin and death, so that death is no longer understood as final destruction, but rather as a transition to eternal life (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, arts. 1005-1006).⁴¹ Death becomes the moment when a person entrusts his or her entire being to God as Creator and source of life. Therefore, death has a soteriological meaning: a person participates in God's work of salvation, which reaches its fulfillment in Christ. Saint Paul expresses this conviction by saying, "If we have died with Christ, we will also live with Him" (Rom. 6:8). Thus, death is not merely a biological event, but an event of faith that finds its meaning in the human person's relationship with Christ, who died and rose again.⁴²

This understanding is also affirmed in the Church's liturgy. The Preface of the Dead states that in death, life is not destroyed but transformed, for after our earthly dwelling comes to an end, God provides an eternal home. This liturgical expression encapsulates the Church's hope that death is a transformation of human existence toward the fullness of life in God. Thus, the salvation offered by Christ does not stop at liberation from sin, but leads humanity to eternal communion with God.⁴³ This hope has an eschatological dimension because it is rooted in the resurrection of Christ and directed toward the resurrection of humanity and eternal life. Benedict XVI, in *Spe Salvi*, emphasizes that Christian hope is rooted in God's love that overcomes death (art. 26).⁴⁴

⁴¹ Herman Embuiru, trans., *Katekismus Gereja Katolik* (Ende: Nusa Indah, 1995).

⁴² Yosep Pranadi, "Kematian Dan Kehidupan Abadi: Sebuah Eksplorasi Dalam Perspektif Gereja Katolik," *Melintas* 34, no. 3 (2019): 248–71, <https://doi.org/10.26593/mel.v34i3.3459.248-271>.

⁴³ Embuiru, *Katekismus Gereja Katolik*, bdk. no. 1010-1013

⁴⁴ Benedict XVI, *SPE SALVI* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007).

This hope is not merely an anticipation of life after death, but serves as the foundation for a life of faith in this world. Since the whole of human life is directed toward fulfillment in God, faith in salvation also has ethical and communal consequences. The faithful are called to embody love, solidarity, justice, and peace as concrete expressions of their participation in God's work of salvation. Thus, an eschatological orientation does not separate human beings from worldly life but rather fosters a sense of responsibility toward others and creation.⁴⁵

In this context, prayer for the deceased becomes a concrete expression of the loving relationship within the Church's faith. Such prayer expresses the conviction that death does not sever the communion of the faithful. The lives of the deceased remain within the *Communio Sanctorum* the communion of saints that unites the faithful in God's love. Therefore, remembering and praying for the deceased is not merely an act of reminiscing about the past, but an expression of faith in the continuity of communion in Christ. The Asian theological perspective enriches this interpretation by emphasizing relationality and solidarity in understanding life and salvation. Confronting death involves not only a person's personal relationship with God but also their relationships with others, the community, nature, and all of creation. From this perspective, salvation has a holistic scope because human life always unfolds within a network of relationships. Prayer for the deceased can be understood as a form of engagement in a spiritual relationship that connects human life in the present with the fullness of life in God. Thus, faith in eternal life continues to have implications for how people build relationships and bring love and peace into their daily lives.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Johann Baptist Metz, "Facing the World : A Theological and Biographical Inquiry," *Theological Studies*, 2014, 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563914520919>.

⁴⁶ Wilfred, "Asian Theological Ferment (For Doing Theology in Contemporary Indonesia : Interdisciplinary Perspectives)."

This Catholic horizon becomes significant when viewed in the context of Catholics with a Marapu background. Data from an interview with Stefanus Radjang (P2) indicates that some believers still revert to Marapu practices when facing illness, accidents, or family tragedies for example, by interpreting omens using chicken or pig livers. According to the informant, this situation is related to the fact that the understanding and lived experience of the Catholic faith in daily life are not yet firmly established.⁴⁷ This finding indicates that the intersection between Marapu and Catholic beliefs does not occur solely in the realm of death rituals but is also connected to the process of internalizing and passing down the faith in the face of various life experiences.

The testimony of Bernabas Bili Ngongo, CSsR (I1), highlights a similar issue in family life. Some families strive to pass on the faith through prayer and participation in the Eucharist, while others are less active in church life and attend only on certain occasions, such as Christmas and Easter. This situation affects the process of passing on the faith to the next generation. In the Catholic faith, the family is a vital environment for the growth of faith. Therefore, receiving Baptism must be followed by a process of catechesis, a life of prayer, participation in the liturgy, and ongoing faith formation.⁴⁸ Kristoforus Y. Ngasi, Pr (I2), provided further explanation regarding this situation. According to him, believers from families that have long lived within the Catholic tradition tend to have a more structured pattern of faith transmission, whereas believers with a Marapu background more often engage in dual religious practices. He attributed this situation, among other things, to the fact that the process of preparation for becoming Catholic is not always adequate. These findings show that formal baptism alone does not automatically

⁴⁷ Stefanus Radjang (P2). (2025). *Interview*

⁴⁸ Bernabas Bili Ngongo, CSsR (I1), "Interview", *Wetebula, Sumba-NTT*, 30 Juli 2025

make the Catholic faith the primary framework for understanding life experiences, including illness, suffering, death, and salvation.⁴⁹

However, this dual practice does not in and of itself indicate a rejection of the Catholic faith. Field data more clearly reveal the complexity of the intersection between religious and cultural identities. The Marapu tradition continues to play a role in family, customary, and community life, while baptism places an individual within the Catholic Church community. Tension can arise when these two dimensions have not been given adequate space for reflection and deepening. Thus, the issue at hand is not merely a choice between Marapu and Catholicism, but rather the process of how the Catholic faith is understood and lived out within the cultural context that has shaped the lives of the faithful.⁵⁰ Based on the above discussion, the Catholic perspective on death can be summarized through five interrelated characteristics. First, it is Christ-centered, because the meaning of death is rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ. Second, it is eschatological, because death is oriented toward the resurrection and eternal life. Third, it is personal, because salvation concerns every human being in their relationship with God. Fourth, it is communal, because those who have died remain in communion with the faithful through the *Communio Sanctorum*. Fifth, it is liturgical, because faith in death, the resurrection, and eternal life is lived out and celebrated in the life of the Church, particularly through the Eucharist and funeral liturgy.⁵¹

Thus, in the Catholic faith, death is an event of faith that finds its meaning in Christ and leads humanity to the fullness of life in God. The connection with those who have died is maintained through prayer and the loving communion of the Church, but the basis of this relationship

⁴⁹ Kristoforus Y. Ngasi, Pr (I2). (2025). "Interview". *Wetebula, Sumba-NTT*, 30 Juli 2025

⁵⁰ Si, Panda, and Sudhiarsa, "Umat Katolik Sumba Di Tengah Himpitan Tradisi Dan Kepercayaan Marapu: Menyimak Dan Menemukan Upaya Pastoral Untuk Menumbuhkan Pengetahuan Iman Umat Katolik Sumba."

⁵¹ Pranadi, "Kematian Dan Kehidupan Abadi: Sebuah Eksplorasi Dalam Perspektif Gereja Katolik."

differs from that with ancestors in other belief systems. In the context of Catholics with a Marapu background, an understanding of death must therefore continue to be internalized through the family, catechesis, liturgy, and pastoral accompaniment. This Catholic perspective then serves as the foundation for bringing it into dialogue with the Marapu perspective, so that their points of convergence and divergence can be critically examined without losing the theological distinctiveness of each tradition.

Fusion of Horizons: Towards a Theology of Reconciliation

The fusion of horizons in this study is not intended as the merging of two belief systems into one, but rather as the formation of a new understanding through the encounter between the Marapu horizon and the Catholic horizon. This encounter takes place through a process of facing one another, listening, examining, and reinterpreting the meanings that emerge from each horizon. The focus is not on finding terminological similarities between Prai Marapu and eternal life, nor on equating the relationship with ancestors with the *Communio Sanctorum*. The primary attention is directed toward the transformation of understanding that arises when the two horizons are placed within a space of dialogue. Field data regarding death as a journey toward Prai Marapu, connections with family and ancestors, and ritual structures involving the community raise new questions for the Catholic faith concerning death as a relational experience. Conversely, the Catholic faith, rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ, provides a theological horizon for interpreting relationships, grief, hope, and communal responsibility in light of human dignity and the call to life.⁵²

⁵² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 1975.

The encounter between these two horizons brought about the first shift in how we understand human beings. Based on research findings, the Marapu horizon portrays human beings as individuals whose existence is inseparable from a network of relationships with family, community, ancestors, nature, and the religious order. The Catholic horizon acknowledges the importance of this relationality but provides a different theological foundation by understanding human beings as creatures made in the image of God, called to build relationships with God and one another, and to attain the fullness of life in love.⁵³ The fusion of these horizons yields an understanding of human beings as individuals who are rooted in community while simultaneously possessing an intrinsic dignity that cannot be reduced to group membership. This perspective is crucial for interpreting the phenomenon of violence. Loyalty to one's family, clan, or group cannot serve as a basis for denying or demeaning the dignity of other human beings.

The second change relates to the meaning of death. Within the Marapu worldview, death is a transition to *Prai/Praingu* Marapu and remains within a network of relationships with family and ancestors.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the Catholic faith places death within the mystery of Christ's Passion and the hope for eternal life. The convergence of these two perspectives opens up an understanding of death as an event that possesses spiritual, communal, and moral dimensions. Questions about death do not stop at the purpose of a person's existence after death, but extend to how the living grieve, honor the deceased, maintain relationships, and build a shared life. Death rituals can be interpreted not

⁵³ Daeng Maeja et al., "Kristus Dalam Berbagai Budaya."

⁵⁴ Panda, "Perjalanan Jiwa Ke 'Kampung Leluhur' Konsep Kematian Menurut Kepercayaan Asli Masyarakat Sumba (Marapu) Dan Perjumpaannya Dengan Ajaran Katolik."

only as expressions of cultural heritage but also as spaces for shaping meaning regarding relationships, responsibility, solidarity, and hope.⁵⁵

The third change concerns the understanding of the relationship with ancestors and the community. The dialogue between these two perspectives does not equate the relationship with ancestors in Marapu with the *Communio Sanctorum* in the Catholic faith. This theological distinction is maintained. Nevertheless, the encounter between the two reveals a shared concern for the continuity of relationships and communal responsibility. From this point emerges the understanding that respect for the deceased must have consequences for the way people treat those who are still alive. Respect for ancestors does not end with the performance of rituals but can be directed toward the maintenance of peace, family solidarity, and the protection of life. From a Catholic perspective, the *Communio Sanctorum* also gains contextual relevance as a call to concretely embody the communion of love in community life.⁵⁶

The fourth change is directly related to the phenomenon of violence. Statistical data on 116 cases do not indicate that Marapu is the cause of violence. Rather, these data should be viewed as empirical indications of the existence of social problems that require a moral interpretation.⁵⁷ The fusion of horizons helps avoid two reductive tendencies: first, viewing culture as the source of violence; second, accepting all cultural elements without critical evaluation. Through the encounter between Marapu and Catholicism, relational values, solidarity, responsibility toward the family, respect for ancestors, and community ties can be interpreted as ethical resources for peacebuilding.⁵⁸ However,

⁵⁵ C B Becker et al., "How Funerals Mediate the Psycho-Social Impact of Grief : Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Responses to a National Survey in Japan," *SSM - Mental Health* 2, no. July (2022): 100169, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2022.100169>.

⁵⁶ Lolo, "Not Forbidden but a Fellowship ' Food ': A Theological Discourse on the Dynamic Encounter between Christian and Marapu Religion in Sumba , Indonesia."

⁵⁷ Rara, *Statistik Kriminal Propinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur 2024*.

⁵⁸ Lolo, "Not Forbidden but a Fellowship ' Food ': A Theological Discourse on the Dynamic Encounter between Christian and Marapu Religion in Sumba , Indonesia."

when honor, group loyalty, or customary obligations are interpreted to justify threats, retaliation, or actions that harm others, such interpretations require moral critique. Loyalty to the community must be balanced with respect for the life and dignity of every human being.

The fifth shift directs attention from merely preserving identity toward reconciliation. The Marapu horizon emphasizes the interconnectedness of communities, while the Catholic faith places love, forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation in the light of Christ.⁵⁹ This encounter allows peace to be understood not merely as the absence of violence, but as a process of restoring damaged relationships. Within Johann Baptist Metz's framework of *memoria passionis*, the suffering of victims becomes a crucial element in this process. Victims must not be erased from the community's memory once the conflict has ended.⁶⁰ The fusion of these horizons then leads to a reconciliatory ethic that encompasses remembering the wounds, acknowledging the dignity of victims, taking responsibility, restoring relationships, and preventing the recurrence of violence. At this point, the dialogue between cultural and theological horizons takes on concrete moral consequences.

These findings can be summarized through four key concepts: relationality, dignity, life, and reconciliation. Relationality bridges the Marapu's focus on human relationships with the community and ancestors with the Christian call to love and fellowship. Dignity provides a moral criterion for evaluating actions so that group interests do not override the value of human life. Life serves as an orientation that directs cultural values toward the protection of human beings, rather than the legitimization of violence. Reconciliation translates the results of the dialogue into the practice of restoring broken relationships. The fusion of horizons in this study is not a new doctrinal synthesis, but rather the

⁵⁹ Daeng Maeja et al., "Kristus Dalam Berbagai Budaya."

⁶⁰ Metz, "Facing the World : A Theological and Biographical Inquiry."

formation of a horizon of understanding born of this encounter, which gives rise to a new moral-pastoral orientation.

At this point, Gadamer's hermeneutics does not stop at being a theory that explains the possibility of an encounter between two horizons. The concept of the "fusion of horizons" is used to interpret the transformation of understanding that occurs through the process of dialogue.⁶¹ Death rituals, which might initially be viewed primarily as traditional customs, are interpreted as spaces for the formation of meaning regarding relationships and responsibilities. The differences between Marapu and Catholicism do not stop at a clash of beliefs but are situated within a dialogical process that allows contextual understanding to develop. Similarly, violence is not merely viewed as a social issue but becomes a moral issue concerning how cultural values and faith can be directed toward respect for life. This transformation of understanding constitutes one of the primary hermeneutical contributions of this study.

Theological Reflection on Violence and Peace

Crime data from East Nusa Tenggara particularly the Sumba region provides an empirical context for interpreting the phenomenon of violence in this study. The BPS data used in this study, including a compilation of 116 cases, is not intended as evidence that the Marapu tradition is the cause of violence. Rather, this data should be understood as an indicator that crime and conflict are real social issues in community life. Statistics provide a macro-level picture, while interviews offer insights into experiences and cultural interpretations at the community level. These two types of data serve distinct analytical functions and must be maintained within their respective contexts.⁶²

⁶¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 1975.

⁶² Rara, *Statistik Kriminal Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur 2023*.

Violence in community life occurs across various relational spaces, ranging from the family, the community, and intergroup relations to broader social relationships. Values such as honor, family loyalty, obligations toward relatives, and *kabihu* (clan) solidarity essentially serve to maintain social order and cohesion. Problems arise when these values are interpreted exclusively or detached from respect for life. Under such conditions, values that originally served to bind the community can be used to legitimize pressure, threats, retaliation, or violence. The focus of the analysis, therefore, is not to identify cultural values as the cause of violence, but rather to examine how a value is interpreted and manifested in specific social situations.⁶³ Distinguishing between cultural values and violence is crucial to understanding this phenomenon. Honor does not inherently lead to violence, just as loyalty to one's *kabihu* (clan) does not automatically result in retaliation, and reverence for ancestors cannot be equated with aggressive behavior. Violence develops within complex contexts and can be linked to power relations, social inequality, a history of hostility, economic pressures, family dynamics, and interpretations of social obligations and honor.⁶⁴

An analysis of violence in the Sumba context also reveals a religious dimension that is inseparable from the community's cultural experience. Rituals such as *Saringgi* and *Moritana* are understood within the framework of restoring balance between the human world, nature, and the spirit world. The symbols of blood and sacrifice are embedded in ritual structures related to fertility and the renewal of relationships with ancestors. In this context, ritual acts take on a meaning distinct from the notion of violence as merely a destructive act.⁶⁵ However, the meaning of an action does not always remain identical when the social context

⁶³ Kapita, *Masyarakat Sumba Dan Adat Istiadatnya*, 1987.

⁶⁴ Deta, "Marapu Indigenous Resistance against the Corporation to Protect Land : Perceiving Land through Inter-Subjective Cosmology."

⁶⁵ Derung et al., "Makna Upacara Kematian Dalam Keagamaan Marapu."

changes. The hierarchical social structure within the *kabihu* (clan) system, including the relationship between the *maramba* (king) and the *ata* (servant), can create inequalities that open the door to forms of structural violence. At this point, there is a tension between the function of customary law in maintaining order and the possibility of its use as an instrument of domination or exclusion. This issue can be interpreted through Gadamer's hermeneutics as an encounter between the traditional-religious horizon and the accompanying social change. The "fusion of horizons" does not mean erasing one of the horizons, but rather opening up the possibility for old meanings to be questioned and reinterpreted in new situations.⁶⁶

The horizon of Catholic theology provides a normative perspective for this interpretive process. In Karl Rahner's reflection, suffering is the space of human experience of God's presence within history. Suffering does not in and of itself possess positive value, but it becomes the place where human beings confront their own limitations and open themselves to the mystery of God.⁶⁷ This perspective can be reconciled with Johann Baptist Metz's concept of *memoria passionis*, that is, a critical remembrance of the victims' suffering. This memory is not merely a recollection of the past; rather, it possesses prophetic power because it fosters solidarity and challenges the structures that allow suffering to persist.⁶⁸ Within this framework, the experience of violence in Sumba can be viewed as a space for theological reflection. The symbols of blood, sacrifice, and purification found in local rituals can serve as a point of entry for dialogue with the symbolism of the cross of Christ. However, this dialogue does not mean simply equating the meaning of Marapu rituals

⁶⁶ Halomoan Alfian Londok, "Kontribusi Hermeneutik Hans-Georg Gadamer Bagi Dialog Antaragama Di Indonesia," *Sanjiwani* 13, no. September (2022): 177–87.

⁶⁷ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978).

⁶⁸ Metz, "Facing the World : A Theological and Biographical Inquiry."

with the mystery of the cross. The cross holds a distinctive meaning in the Christian faith as an event of love, forgiveness, and salvation. From this perspective, the suffering of victims must not be legitimized in the name of tradition, but rather serves as a call to foster solidarity, restore human dignity, and bring about liberation. The FABC's concept of "liberating reconciliation" reinforces this orientation by placing reconciliation in close connection with justice and the restoration of human dignity.⁶⁹

In the context of Sumba, this dialogue allows violence to be positioned as a locus theologicus that is, a space of concrete experience where questions about God, humanity, suffering, and salvation gain relevance. Marapu cosmology and Catholic theology still have fundamental differences in their understanding of spiritual reality and salvation. However, the two can be brought into dialogue when death and suffering are interpreted as experiences possessing relational and transformative dimensions. Within the Marapu framework, death is associated with the journey toward *Prai Marapu* and the restoration of a relationship with the ancestral world; in the Catholic faith, Christ's death leads to reconciliation and new life. The convergence of these two frameworks opens the possibility of interpreting the experience of death and suffering from a perspective of transformation toward peace, without erasing the theological differences between them.⁷⁰

Theological and Pastoral Implications

Dialogical and Reconciliatory Theological Model

Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic approach provides an epistemological basis for the development of a dialogical theological model

⁶⁹ Federation of Asian Bishops' (FABC) Conferences, "Asian Integral Pastoral Approach to Reconciliation" (Bangkok, 2003).

⁷⁰ Panda, "Perjalanan Jiwa Ke 'Kampung Leluhur' Konsep Kematian Menurut Kepercayaan Asli Masyarakat Sumba (Marapu) Dan Perjumpaannya Dengan Ajaran Katolik."

rooted in the concept of "*fusion of horizons*". This process depicts the encounter of two traditions, Catholic and Marapu, who open themselves to each other's meanings and horizons of truth. This kind of dialogue demands hermeneutic openness, respect for differences, and a willingness to experience mutual transformation. In the context of theology, this encounter is not merely intellectual communication, but rather an existential dialogue that leads to a *mutual conversion of horizons*, namely a shared conversion toward a new, more inclusive and transformative understanding.

In both traditions, death is not understood simply as a biological end, but as a theological space for deepening solidarity and spiritual awareness. For the Marapu tradition, death is a transition to the realm of the ancestors who remain connected to the living community, while the Catholic faith views it as a path to eternal communion with God. The hermeneutic encounter between these two horizons positions theology not merely to affirm dogma, but as a *praxis* of reconciliation that deepens the spirituality and social solidarity of the community. Thus, dialogical theology becomes a praxis of peace and social transformation, not just a closed theoretical reflection.

The rituals, symbols, and prayers of both traditions provide a space for interfaith learning (*learning from the other*). In death rites, for example, communities learn to understand suffering communally, manage conflict symbolically, and renew social relations through reconciliation. Therefore, the theology of reconciliation in Sumba opens up space for a new spirituality rooted in an appreciation of alterity and a recognition of the Holy Spirit's work in local cultural history.

Strengthening Inculturative Pastoralism in Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara

One practical implication of this dialogical theological model is the development of inculturative pastoral care in the Sumba region. Inculturation here is not understood as the assimilation of local culture into established Catholic liturgical structures, but rather as *a mutual conversion of horizons*, a process of mutual enrichment between the Gospel and local culture. True inculturation is dialogical, participatory, and kenotic: the Church is called to abandon attitudes of cultural superiority in order to learn from local wisdom and rediscover the contextual face of the Gospel.

In a pastoral context, the local Church can integrate Marapu symbolic elements such as ancestor veneration rituals, symbols of cosmic balance, and forms of communal prayer into Catholic liturgy, particularly during funeral Masses or requiem celebrations. This approach enriches the congregation's understanding of the faith while honoring Marapu spiritual values, which emphasize harmony between humans, nature, and the spirit world. As emphasized in *Ecclesia in Asia art.21*, inculturation aims to ensure that the Gospel takes root in the soil of the people's lives and fosters authentic and living expressions of faith.

This pastoral approach shows that the Catholic faith is not a foreign element superimposed on local culture, but rather a divine seed (*semina Verbi*) that grows from within it. Marapu values such as cosmic balance, social justice, and communal loyalty can serve as pedagogical resources for Catholics to live out Evangelical ethics contextually. Thus, inculturation is two-way: local cultures are enriched by the Gospel, while the Gospel finds new forms of expression through local cultural symbols and practices.

The Role of the Local Church in Education for a Culture of Peace

For the Sumbanese, culture is not only a traditional heritage but also a spiritual means connecting humans with their ancestors and the Creator. Within the framework of inculturative theology, the Church recognizes the existence of *semina Verbi*, the "seeds of the Word," in the Marapu tradition, which align with evangelical values such as respect for life, justice, and cosmic balance. Through reflective and dialogical faith education, the Church can foster a spirituality of peace rooted in local wisdom.

Pa heningu ritual, for example, is not only a religious expression, but also a social mechanism that restores relationships and strengthens community solidarity. In the light of the Paschal mystery of Christ, this rite can be understood as a symbol of reconciliation and renewal of life. Thus, the Marapu tradition can be read as a "cultural parabola" that reveals the universal dimension of God's reconciling love. This approach aligns with the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*, Art.2, which affirms that the Church respects everything true and holy in other religions as a reflection of divine truth.

In the pastoral context of the St. Peter and Paul sub-parish community in Lediwatu as the research locus, this reflection has concrete relevance. The congregation is called to be agents of reconciliation by integrating Marapu values such as deliberation, mutual cooperation, and ancestor reverence into social practices illuminated by the Gospel. Contextual faith education helps people understand that peace is not just an external condition, but an inner disposition and moral responsibility rooted in God's love. Within this framework, culture serves as a transformative bridge between faith and life, between spirituality and social renewal.

Conclusion

In the theological horizon of Marapu and Catholicism, death is understood not as the end of existence, but as a transformative space that opens up the possibility for reconciliation and relational restoration. The Marapu tradition interprets death as a journey to *Prai Marapu*, the realm of the ancestors who maintain the balance of the cosmos and social order. Meanwhile, the Catholic faith places death as human participation in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection which leads to eternal life in *Communio Sanctorum*. These two perspectives intersect in the theological awareness that death functions as a medium for restoring relations between humans, God, ancestors, and others. In the context of Sumba, which is marked by ritual violence and social tension, this understanding opens up opportunities for reinterpreting death as a path to peace and community healing through the integration of traditional rites and expressions of faith.

Gadamer's hermeneutic approach, through the concept of *fusion of horizons*, enables a productive dialogue between the Catholic and Marapu traditions in interpreting the meaning of death. Gadamer's hermeneutics emphasizes openness, a willingness to listen, and equality across traditional horizons, so that theological meaning is not trapped in dogmatic exclusivity, but develops through reflective interaction. Within this framework, rituals, prayers, and religious symbols function as living texts that reveal truth through the community's experience of faith. This interfaith hermeneutic model focuses not only on textual interpretation but also on lived practice, making human life the theological locus where dialogue and spiritual transformation take place, fostering social reconciliation.

For Asian theology, the synthesis between the Marapu and Catholic traditions offers a contextual paradigm that integrates local spirituality and universal values of peace. In an Asian landscape marked by religious

plurality and a wealth of traditional wisdom, this approach emphasizes the urgency of a dialogical and inculturative theology capable of bridging Christian faith with local cultures. Understanding death in this cross-traditional horizon inspires concrete pastoral praxis, in which traditional rites, faith education, and social action are processed as a means of building reconciliation and balance in the cosmos. Thus, Asian theology is not merely a conceptual discourse, but develops as a spiritual movement that fosters ecotheological awareness, cross-traditional solidarity, and a commitment to sustainable peace.

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